

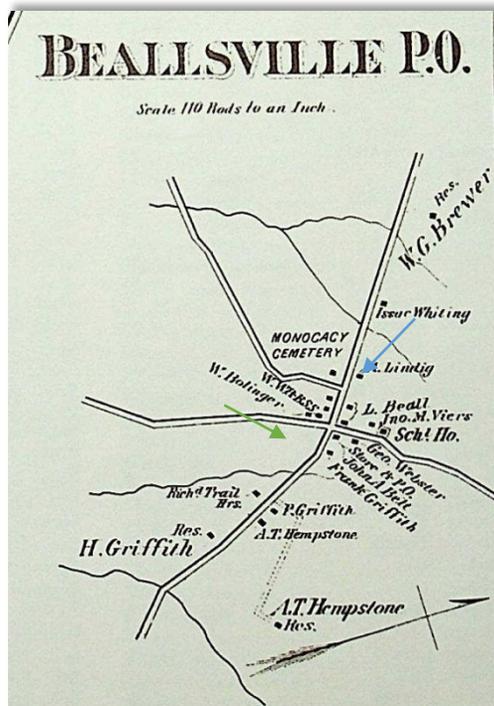
George Peck (c.1858-1880)



Street scenes in Poolesville in 1864 (left) and 1908 (right). The town retained its essential character throughout the latter half of the 19th century. (Photo credits: Montgomery History)

George W. Peck had lived in the Poolesville area of Montgomery County since he was enslaved. He is first documented in the 1867 census of those emancipated at the end of the Civil War, as a nine-year-old boy enslaved by William Poole.¹ There is no indication of his having family members nearby, then or later. However, along with the young Peck, Poole had enslaved Louisa (King) Lear and five of her children, who stayed in the area following Emancipation and may have maintained contact with Peck. In 1870, Peck is found residing with Howard Griffith and his family near Beallsville, while the Lears lived nearby in the household of John A. Jones.² By early 1880, George Peck (about age 21) was working for local storekeeper Lemuel Beall and Louisa Lear (now age 60) was enumerated in Beall's household, working as a cook.³ As they had been enslaved together, it is certain Lear and Peck had known each other for as long as fifteen years before they both worked for Beall.

Lemuel Beall that year had also recently employed a young white girl named Ada Hayes,⁴ whose family had just moved to the Poolesville area from Loudoun County, Virginia. Hyrocles M. Reeves had married Mollie E. (Reeves) Hayes in 1873,⁵ a widow with two young girls, Annie and Ada, who became Reeves' stepdaughters. The couple had four more children by 1880,⁶ when Ada was 11 years old. Since they never appeared in a Montgomery County census, it is unclear where the family was living in January of 1880. The entire family might have been living with Beall,⁷ or they may have been boarding elsewhere in the region while Ada alone was living at Beall's property and working for him. The Reeves family had left Montgomery County by the time of the 1880 census taken in June,⁸ so this is guesswork based on local customs, and the clear indication that the family was not wealthy, nor did they own any land.⁹



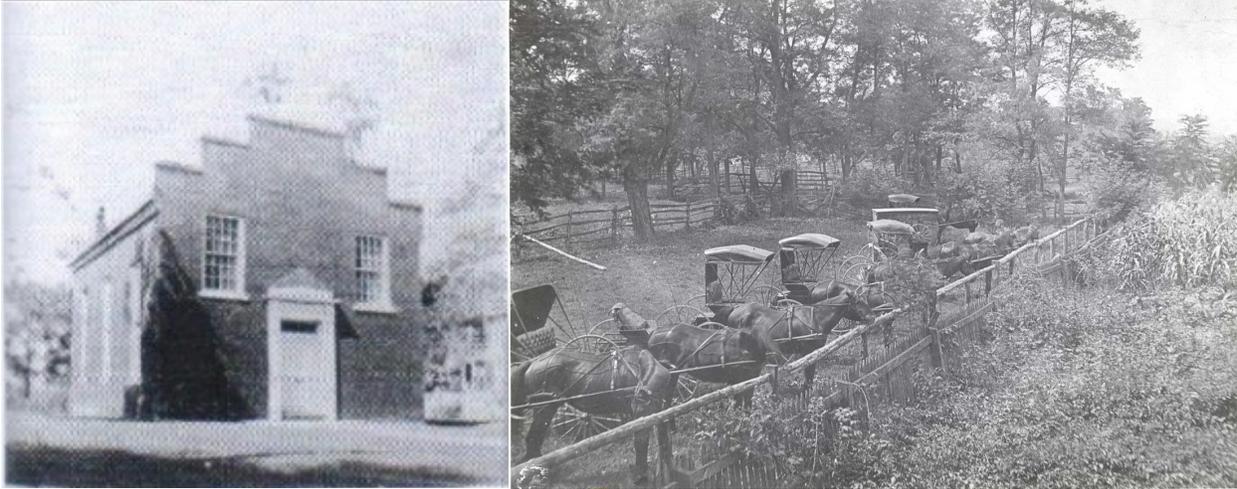
Hopkins Atlas of 1879, showing the residence of Lemuel Beall (blue) and the approximate location of the residence of Calvin Amy (green).

According to newspaper accounts (the only records of the incident that survive), on the morning of Saturday, January 10, 1880, Reverend Calvin Amy heard screams in the barn near his house, and claimed he discovered George Peck there, apparently in the act of attacking Ada Hayes and forcing her into a straw rick against her will.¹⁰ Calvin Amy was the recently-installed pastor at the Baptist Church in Poolesville, having moved his family to a house down the street from Lemuel Beall's in 1879.¹¹ Amy intervened--some sources indicate he happened to be carrying a revolver¹²--and informed Lemuel Beall of what he had seen; meanwhile, George Peck returned to his duties on the farm.¹³ Ada was examined by the local doctor, John W. Ayler, who concluded she was somewhat bruised but otherwise unharmed.¹⁴ Beall and Amy left the scene to fetch the constable from Poolesville, a man named James Uriah "Hugh" Miles, who had been appointed to the position of local constable in 1878.¹⁵

Miles was also a nephew of Peck's employer Lemuel Beall, the son of Beall's sister Elvira.¹⁶ When he saw the

officer approaching, Peck tried to run into the nearby woods, but was quickly captured by the other men, handcuffed and chained. The constable took him to Poolesville (about 1.5 miles away) and brought him before local Justice of the Peace Stephen G. Donohoe, where he allegedly admitted his guilt, and his intention to complete the act of rape if he had not been interrupted.¹⁷ Newspaper reports about Black men accused of crimes often contained this common element: a "confession" reported, though usually after the fact by the same law enforcement officers who later allowed the prisoners in their charge to be abducted and killed.

Miles did not immediately take Peck to the jail in Rockville. A journey to Rockville would have taken at least four hours at this time; however, as the jailer lived in the building and could be roused to admit a prisoner, captors often did arrive at the jail at any hour of the night. Instead of transporting Peck to the jail, the constable held him in the Odd Fellows Hall in Poolesville, ostensibly intending to take him to Rockville on Monday morning.¹⁸ This decision put Peck in considerably increased danger from locals who knew he was not secured by the Sheriff in the County jail, but merely in the sole custody of a small-town constable. Indeed, as news of the incident spread through the area, an angry crowd began to gather around the building, and Miles reconsidered his plan. He decided to move Peck from the Odd Fellows Hall to his own residence for the night, indicating to at least one reporter that he did not wish "to leave him unguarded."¹⁹



Above left: Poolesville Presbyterian Church c. 1900. It appears much the same today (*photo credit pending*). Above right: This photo is attributed as the “buggy parking lot” for the Poolesville Presbyterian Church, probably taken between 1895-1915. It is possible this view was taken from the road and may depict a portion of the land on which George Peck was killed in 1880. It also shows a rail fence, of the type Peck was hauled over on his way to the tree. (*Photo credit: Montgomery History*).

Reports indicate that Peck was still hanging, in full view of the townspeople and only 50 yards from the Presbyterian Church, until 9:00 am or 10:00 am on Sunday morning, when his body was finally cut down (possibly by Miles himself). This was likely not an oversight but an intentional message for the community, most especially for Black members of the community. Justice Donahoe summoned a local jury of inquest to hear testimony and render a verdict on cause of death. The *Baltimore Sun* states that the jury could not unanimously agree on the statement of verdict, as some insisted on endorsing the actions of the lynching party, and therefore the Justice discharged this first jury. The report then listed a second jury, composed of Charles Elgin, Fremont Jones, Frank Williams, William Griffith, Lemuel Beall, Richard Spates, Frank Spates, Frank Sparrough, Charles Matthews, G. Mackintosh, Thomas Davis, and Thomas Fyffe, who “re-entered a verdict of death by strangulation at the hands of unknown parties.”²⁴ The jury represented established landowners and community leaders from families with residential longevity in the Poolesville/Beallsville area at the time, including many former slaveowners.²⁵ The names of the initial discharged jurors were not given in this article. Other accounts do not mention names of any jurors, nor the existence of a discharged jury, and state that no attempt was made to identify the perpetrators (though according to earlier statements, most were easily recognized).²⁶ All reports frame George Peck as a known convict who had been in jail before and accused of similar crimes in the past, though it is unlikely, especially during this time period, that he would still be employed in the same small town in which he had lived his entire life if this were the case. No records or newspaper accounts have been found that support these statements of his previous deeds alleged in the press.

After his body was cut down, Peck was moved to a stable shed, and later “buried quietly in a field.”²⁷ According to the *Sun*, within days he was “exhumed by colored people and buried in their churchyard near the village.”²⁸ This probably refers to the Elijah United Methodist Church Cemetery on Beallsville Road just outside of Poolesville, which was property used by the Black

community for a church, school, and cemetery since 1870. There is evidence of burials starting then, most unmarked, which predated the construction of the first church building.²⁹ On the 1879 Hopkins Atlas, it is marked as a “colored schoolhouse.” It is likely that George Peck’s remains are buried there still, and if accurate, the local Black community’s act of claiming his body and the dignity conveyed by a churchyard burial suggests he was not a notorious criminal, but simply one of their own. Unfortunately, the records of this church were lost in a fire in 1950.



View of Elijah Methodist Church Cemetery, taken in 2018. Quite possibly the final resting place of George Peck.
(Photo credit: Glenn Wallace)

The 1880 census was taken in June of that year, six months after the lynching, and by then both Reverend Amy’s family and the Reeves family had left Montgomery County. The Reeves moved to Baltimore; Annie and Ada, the older Hayes girls (now with the last name Reeves) were recorded as working in a cotton mill near Hampden at ages eleven and fourteen.³⁰ Twenty years later, by the next extant census in 1900, many of the Medley District people named in the incident were either deceased or had dispersed to other areas.³¹

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Notes

- ¹ Jane C. Sween (transcribed), *Slave Statistics, 1867-1868* (Montgomery County: Commissioner of Slave Statistics, 1867-1868).
- ² William N. Hurley, Jr. (transcribed), *1870 Population Census of Montgomery County, Maryland*, (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1999), 182/205, and *1880 Population Census of Montgomery County, Maryland*, (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1999), 66. Note that the Lear family's surname in 1870 is mis-transcribed as "Sear" and otherwise often enumerated in other homophonic variations (Lair, Leah, Layer, etc.)
- ³ "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law," *Montgomery County Sentinel*, January 12, 1880.
- ⁴ *Ibid.* Most newspaper accounts spell the name Hays, though her mother's marriage record indicates the name was Hayes (see note 5).
- ⁵ Patricia B. Duncan and Elizabeth R. Frain, *Loudoun County, Virginia Marriages after 1850: Volume I, 1851-1880* (Westminster, MD: Willow Bend Books, 2000), 185.
- ⁶ *United States Federal Census: Population Schedule, 1880*, www.ancestry.com (August 15, 2019).
- ⁷ "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Shepherdstown Register* [Shepherdstown, WV], January 17, 1880.
- ⁸ Hurley, 1880.
- ⁹ Maryland State Archives, *Montgomery County Land Records: Active Indices, Grantee Index*, www.mdlandrec.net (September 9, 2019).
- ¹⁰ "Lynch Law in Maryland," *The Sun* [Baltimore, MD], January 13, 1880.
- ¹¹ J.F. Weishampel, Jr., *History of Baptist Churches in Maryland* (Baltimore, MD, 1885).
- ¹² "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law."
- ¹³ "Lynch Law in Maryland," *Wheeling Register* [Wheeling, WV], January 14, 1880.
- ¹⁴ "Lynch Law in Maryland" (*The Sun*).
- ¹⁵ John D. Bowman, *Guide to Selections from the Montgomery County Sentinel: January 1, 1876-December 31, 1881* (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, 2005), 61.
- ¹⁶ *Beall Family File*. Montgomery History: Jane Sween Research Library and Special Collections (August 12, 2019).
- ¹⁷ "Lynch Law in Maryland" (*The Sun*).
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*Wheeling Register*).
- ²⁰ "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*Shepherdstown Register*).
- ²¹ "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law."
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*Shepherdstown Register*).
- ²⁴ "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*The Sun*). Several of the names were misspelled or given incorrectly in the newspaper article. Names listed here have been corrected according to local sources.
- ²⁵ Sween.
- ²⁶ "Attempted Rape and Lynch Law."
- ²⁷ "Lynch Law in Maryland," (*Shepherdstown Register*).
- ²⁸ "Lynch Law in Maryland" (*The Sun*).
- ²⁹ Irene C. Pierce, *A History of Elijah United Methodist Church and Cemetery* (Poolesville, MD: Historic Medley District, Inc., 1995).
- ³⁰ *United States Federal Census: Population Schedule, 1880*, www.ancestry.com (August 15, 2019).
- ³¹ William N. Hurley, Jr. (transcribed), *1900 Population Census of Montgomery County, Maryland*, (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 2000).